

to touch and be touched by mimedoll

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Summary:

5 times Richie can't touch, and the one time he can.

to touch and be touched

One.

The Toziers were not an affectionate people; well, they weren't 'til Richie came along. Wentworth believed a man should not show affection for his son because it would make him soft, and soft men are not real men. As for Maggie, she had always been averse to hugs and kisses. Richie never receives affection, so he tries to give as much as he can. That way he can still get the skin contact his body desires.

However, Richie had learned the hard way that a lot of people don't like to be touched the way he does. Richie would pinch Eddie's cheeks, and Eddie would complain about germs and tell him to stop. Richie would laugh and it was funny for a while, but he couldn't help the way his heart felt after the laughter died down. His mind would wander away from him and he'd ask, "What is wrong with me? Why am I like this?" He could never tell Eddie or anyone else this, of course, because he'd rather take on all the hurt in the world than make someone else suffer.

There are five defining moments in Richie's life that reminded him that people like him don't get to show public displays of affection and that he doesn't deserve it either. The first was during the summer the Losers Club was terrorized by a shapeshifting clown, which should have been the main stressor in his life at the time. Unfortunately for him, being a young teen is very dramatic.

After Bill socked Richie in the jaw, he started hanging around The Aladdin more than usual. Richie hated fighting with his friends, but he was shit with words, and gaming was way more fun than talking about his feelings. He had met another boy at the arcade that helped with the loneliness. His name was Connor Bowers, kid cousin of the one and only Henry Bowers. Connor wasn't like Henry, though. Connor was almost as good at *Street Fighter* as Richie, and he laughed at Richie's dirty jokes, and he didn't have a dumb mullet.

Maybe Richie should have seen it coming, being related to Bowers should have been a bigger red flag than it was. They were gaming together again, the game of the day being *Super Mario Bros*. Richie decided he needed a break from *Street Fighter*, and the pair had unlocked a new world the day before and desperate to beat it. Richie as Mario and Connor as Luigi, obviously.

The two had been playing for so long Richie's hands were starting to cramp, but they were so close Richie could already taste the victory. Before he knew it, the two 8-bit characters approached the flag pole. Mario and Luigi slid down the flag pole as the pair beat the game. Richie was so ecstatic that in the excitement of the moment, that he forgot not to touch. He grabbed Connor's face and left him a big, wet kiss on the cheek. As he realized what he'd done, his face whitened as the fear of the consequences of his actions dawned upon him.

"I'm sorry! I didn't mean to, I just got cau-" Richie spat out, flushing red and eyes watering.

"It's fine," Connor reassured him with a slight smile and pink cheeks.

Richie couldn't believe what he was hearing. This was the first time he had touched someone like that without backlash. He should have known it was too good to be true. He saw Connor's face fall and Richie's heartbeat quickened as he turned to look in the direction Connor was.

"What the fuck, Fagmouth?" Henry mocked, surrounded by his minions. "You mackin' on my cousin?"

"N-No! It's not what it looks like, I swear." Richie pleaded.

"Connor, get the fuck over here or I'm telling your ma that you're a queer." Henry barked, snapping his fingers.

Richie didn't give a shit about the dumb fight with Bill at that moment, as he watched Connor leave his side to join Henry. So this is betrayal, he thought.

"Fuck off, faggot," Connor's voice cracked as if he didn't really mean it, but he felt like he had to say it for his own sake. Somewhat selfish,

but Richie understood.

"It wasn't what it looked like," Richie repeated weakly as he ran away from the arcade. He heard the sound of Henry and the others chasing after him. Richie couldn't bring himself to care if they caught him or not. Eventually, the footsteps got too far away and Richie was safe for that moment. He knew the next time Bowers saw him, he'd get his glasses broken again. As soon as he was alone, he couldn't stop the sob from escaping his throat. He made a promise to himself as he sat alone that he would never make that mistake again.

"Don't touch," Richie reminded himself aloud, as if to set the words into stone.

"Don't touch," Richie repeated himself, this time to include his friends, and Eddie. He loved to shower them in affection, but he was getting older and his peers had stopped finding it funny. He would be in high school when the summer ended. High school boys didn't kiss and hug each other. If a boy did such a thing, that would make him a queer. Good things did not happen to queers in Derry.

Yes, god, would Richie miss the skin contact like hell but when he felt that tingle in his fingers he would remember that day in the arcade, the way Connor's face went from tomato red to ghost white as Henry manifested behind Richie. He would remind himself how much worse it could've been, how Connor could have been hurt, because Richie had been beaten so much it didn't make a difference any more. Richie cared so deeply for other people that he would put their safety before his own needs. This would be how he survived this, protecting his friends from the consequences of his actions.

Two.

The lack of physical contact had started to take a toll on Richie. The others hadn't noticed, or at least hadn't brought it up to Richie. It had been about four months since the incident at the arcade, and so far Richie had strictly abided to the rule. Richie had changed, however.

He was once bubbly, and hyperactive as a result of his ADHD, now he was irritable, depressed, and always felt lonely even surrounded by his best friends.

It was now November, the first semester of freshman year was nearing to an end, there was about a foot of snow on the ground. Usually Richie loved the snow, but as Richie walked his usual trek to school geared with a scarf, beanie, and a coat, he couldn't seem to find one thing he liked about the scenery. Richie sighed as he neared Eddie's house, dragging his feet up the walkway. Being around Eddie was the hardest for Richie, their relationship had changed a lot since the arcade. Their usual back and forth wasn't as fun, and Richie struggled to control the urge to torture Eddie with affection.

"Good morning, Richard!" Eddie chirped as he joined Richie's side. As much as he hated to think about it, Richie had started to feel like Eddie was happier when Richie wasn't. He was a morning person now, and Eddie is usually scary as shit before 11 A.M.

"Whatever," Richie replied, already feeling his headache return. The two walked to Bill's house next, as Eddie babbled on about bullshit Richie couldn't make himself listen to if he wanted to.

"I-Is R-R-Richie buh-being cr-cranky today?" Bill asked with a shit-eating smirk.

"Fuck off," Richie snapped, his head pulsating.

"I-I'll t-tuh-take th-that as a y-yes." Bill rolled his eyes as he offered Richie a tumbler of coffee just the way Richie liked it, with a bunch of half and half and three and a half spoons of sugar.

"Billy boy! I knew you were my favorite for a reason," Richie forced a smile as he took the coffee, ignoring the pout on Eddie's face that broke Richie's heart.

The boys adventured to Stan's, then Bev's, then Ben's, then lastly to school. By the time they get to school, they still have about fifteen minutes before classes start. Bill, Stan, Eddie, and Richie had been following this routine since elementary school, and had recently added Ben and Beverly to the trail. Richie usually enjoyed it, but it

seemed harder and harder to enjoy things.

"We should do something to celebrate the beginning of Thanksgiving break!" Ben suggested, sunshiny like always.

"Ooh! Let's go to the movies. There's that zombie movie, 'The Dead Next Door' that just came out." Beverly suggested just as excitedly.

"Why do we always have to see scary movies? Our lives are already scary enough." Eddie protested, with that cute little pout of his.

"Don't be such a scaredy cat, Eddie Spaghetti!" Richie teased, without an ounce of enthusiasm.

"Anything to cheer you up, you hag." Eddie replied, sticking his tongue out and scrunching up his nose. *Cute*, Richie thought then smacked himself mentally.

"Th-That s-suh-suh-sounds f-fu-fun. W-We c-can g-g-go r-right af-after sc-school." Bill gleamed. Stan always agreed to do something after Bill did. Bill had that affect on people, especially Stan.

School that day was boring. Richie was a smart kid, and preferred the high stress times of the school year because then he was actually getting a challenge. The week before a break was always boring. Teachers always wanted to put on movies or hand out easy worksheets with dumb puzzles. Needless to say, Richie was basically counting down the hours to see this dumb zombie flick. Three o' clock finally rolled around and he met up with the Losers in the usual spot.

"There he is!" Eddie chirped excitedly, practically pouncing on the taller boy. Richie tried to fight his instincts, but the paranoia made him drop Eddie a little too harshly. Richie's chest felt tight as he saw his friend's face drop, blushing red, clearly embarrassed.

"Uh, we should go... we gotta pick up Mike." Stan broke the tension. The walk to Mike's was long, which held plenty of potential to be awkward after Richie's weirdly aggressive defense.

Richie lagged behind the group as they chatted about their days, laughing happily. Eventually, Eddie stopped being angry and slowed

behind the group to join Richie's side. He could tell something was off about him, but he didn't know what or how to help him.

"Are you okay?" Eddie asked softly once he built up the courage.

"I'm fine," Richie lied, plastering on an exaggerated grin.

"You've been off lately. You don't have to talk about it if you don't want to, but don't lie to me." Eddie said with his arms crossed, chewing on the inside of his lip.

"I know, I'm sorry. I wish I could tell you everything, but I can't. I won't let it affect our friendship any more, though." Richie promised with a halfhearted smile.

"You could tell me, if you wanted. I've killed a clown with you. I'm not going anywhere." Eddie smiled, and Richie wished he could believe him. His secrets would scare Eddie away faster than a leper.

"Thanks, buddy. Maybe someday," Richie stared at his shoes as the group piled onto Mike's front porch. Soon, Mike joined them and they walked to the theater together. Eddie stayed by Richie's side, radiating a comforting energy. Richie didn't know how he did that, he swore the boy was like an empath or something.

Richie and Eddie pooled their allowances together to buy snacks at the concessions, their tickets clutched in hand with M&Ms and popcorn. The two sat next to each other as always, and Eddie reminded Richie to wait for the movie to start before he pigged out. Richie smiled, genuinely, for the first time in a long while. He felt normal again.

The movie started, and it was a terrible film. Gory and exciting to a bunch of thirteen year olds, sure, but it was amateur and poorly written. Eddie hated horror movies, but the gore really got to him. He could tolerate a thriller, but guts and blood made him queasy. He chose a pretty terrible group of friends because the others were completely fascinated by the dyed corn syrup.

As the movie progressed, Eddie was increasingly more uncomfortable. He had leaned into Richie's shoulder and hiding the

screen behind his bucket of popcorn. After a cheap jump scare, Eddie lost the bucket completely. The anxiety built up in his nerves, and before he could process what was happening, he was gripping Richie's hand with all his might. There was a shock that should have made him want to pull away, but he couldn't. He squeezed tighter and Richie's heart sped. He stared at Eddie's hand wrapped around his, and the contact felt so good. It was everything he needed. The lack of touch in his life had completely changed him, he had become someone he didn't recognize because he was so scared of what the world thought of him. It's wrong, Richie reminded himself. This is bad, you broke the rule.

Richie panicked, not wanting a repeat of earlier, he froze in fear. He looked around to see no one paying attention to the two boys with intertwined hands. As the climax of the movie came and went, and nearing an end, Richie sneakily wiggled his hand from Eddie's grasp. Eddie realized what Richie was doing, feeling embarrassed that he had nearly broke Richie's hand because he was being a chicken. Eddie flushed red and wiped the sweat that had collected on his hand on the leg of his pants.

Oh, of course. Eddie hates germs. He would never want to hold your hand, he was just scared. Why would he want to hold your hand, Tozier? Did you forget already? You're dirty, unclean, sinful. Don't. Touch. Richie's mind raced as he collected his garbage, trying to steady his breathing. He ignored how his friends called after him. He had to get out of that theater, and fast. He ran all the way home, heart racing and the hand Eddie held pulsating and tingling.

When he finally crawled into his bed, he felt safe again. No one had seen what the boys had done, it was okay. He wasn't a faggot like Bowers said. He was following the rules, Eddie didn't know the rules but it was okay because Richie did. Richie knew the rules very well, and no one saw Eddie grab his hand so they were both going to be safe. Eddie would not get hurt, just like Connor didn't get hurt. That made Richie feel a little better. He had saved two of his friends by following the rules he had set for himself. It was better to not touch. Better for everyone.

Three.

The longer Richie abided by the "don't touch" rule, the easier it was to do so. He wasn't angry or depressed any more and soon the Losers forgot all about when he was. He was back to being his normal Trashmouth self. His relationships with the Losers was repaired, but he was most excited about being Eddie's best friend again. Their banter and bickering kept him entertained for hours and he lived to make the smaller boy giggle.

It had been about a year since the kids had fought an evil clown who lived in the sewers. It was summer again, and next semester they would be sophomores. It was exciting, but everyone was slightly on edge. A little part of them was scared that It might return again.

Bill tried to stay out of his house as much as possible, because this time of year brought back too many memories for the whole family. Stan occupied himself by keeping Bill busy and bird watching.

Beverly was couch hopping for a long time, staying with whoever would house her after her dad's death. She had family outside of Derry, but she didn't want to leave her friends behind. Richie always wanted a sister, and his parents were rarely home. He begged his mom to let Beverly move in permanently. He even offered to move his things up to the attic so she could have his bedroom. Maggie was definitely not "Mom of the Year" but she would be damned if her son's best friend was going to end up homeless. She even legally adopted Bev, and offered a name change to Beverly Tozier. Bev almost went through with it, but she still had an attachment to Marsh.

Ben avoided the library, it had become too much for him. He would ask Mike to go there for him so he could still research Derry and catch up on summer reading.

Richie was most worried about Eddie, however. Eddie was basically living in a bubble thanks to Mrs. K. He rarely saw Eddie outside, and he tried to call the house phone, but Mrs. K would always hang up before Eddie could get to it. Richie had resorted to writing letters to

Eddie and slipping them through Eddie's bedroom window.

It was a hot day in July, Maggie was out but had left some cash on the counter for takeout. Richie wandered to his old room, now totally belonging to Beverly. She had brought some things from her old place, but her old room was for a little girl and too many things there reminded her of her piece of shit dad. Beverly and Richie had pretty similar tastes, though Bev's was much more refined. Her walls were covered in band posters, a nice red comforter complimented the brown bed frame and matched her sheer curtains.

"Hey Bev," Richie greeted as he knocked on her door, as she had decorated her door with a sign that read "KEEP OUT, RICHARD!!!"

"Come in!" She chirped in reply and Richie let himself into her room, pouncing on her bed and spreading across the mattress.

"Good ol' Mags left us takeout money. Pizza or Chinese?" Richie questioned, making himself comfortable.

"Chinese." Bev replied.

"Pizza it is then," Richie smirked, and Bev threw a pillow at his face. "Kidding! Noodles or fried rice?"

"Hmm, I want teriyaki chicken and fried rice." Bev replied, lifting her face from her magazine.

"Be right back," Richie groaned dramatically as he lifted himself off his bed. He skipped down the stairs to the phone. He dialed the number for the Chinese restaurant that was written on a note stuck to the fridge.

"Hi, can I get an order of teriyaki chicken and fried rice? Then, I want an order of orange chicken and lo mein. Yeah, can you deliver to 6798 Macklin Street? Thanks, dude." Richie hangs the phone up, and made his way back up to his adopted sister's room again.

"Coming in," Richie warned as he barged in. Bev had migrated from her vanity desk to her bed, still reading her magazine. "Food will be here in half an hour."

"Cool," Bev replied, half listening.

Richie sighed, laying down next to Beverly. He started to feel the void Eddie had left. It had been over a month since he had seen the little firecracker. Bev kept him company, but she and Eddie were complete opposites. He loved them the same, but he hadn't been yelled at for smoking in too long.

"What's up with you?" Beverly nudged Richie's side with her foot.

"I'm worried about Eds," he admitted. "What if his mom is, like, torturing him or something?"

"I'm sure he's fine," Bev assured. "Not the happiest, being trapped there, but he's safe."

The doorbell echoed through the house. *Well, that was fast*, Richie thought to himself as he abandoned Bev's bed again. He swung the front door open, expecting to see a delivery driver, but instead Eddie greeted him. His nose was bright red, and his eyes puffy. He was still sniffing, but he tried desperately to stop the tears from falling down his cheeks.

"Eds, what the fuck? Are you okay?" Richie panicked, pulling the smaller inside by his arms.

"I'm sorry, I didn't know where else to go," he held back a sob. "My m-mom... she's really mad. I can't be there right now."

"It's okay Eds, I'm always here for you. Why don't you go up to the attic? I'll be there in a minute." Richie suggested with a comforting smile.

He gathered a blanket, fixed a cup of tea, and grabbed a box of tissues. He made his way up the stairs, stopping by Bev's door.

"Hey. Eddie's here and he's had it pretty rough today. Could you grab the door when takeout gets here? You can stick mine in the fridge." Richie murmured, worry written all over his face.

"Yeah, no problem. You know where to find me if you need extra help." Bev offered, smiling softly. Richie nodded and climbed up the

ladder to the attic, careful not to spill the tea.

"Hi," Richie greeted as he joined Eddie on his bed. He wrapped the blanket around Eddie's shoulders and handed him the mug.

"Hey," Eddie sniffled, taking a sip of tea, still crying softly.

"What's going on?" Richie asked, concerned.

"She found something she wasn't supposed to," Eddie began. "She thinks I'm sick, and dirty, and that I'm going to hell. She was so mad, Rich. Fuck, what if she kicks me out? What am I gonna do? Shit, shit, shit."

"Eddie, whoa, it's gonna be o-" Richie recognized what was happening. Eddie always talked a mile a minute before a panic attack.

"It's not! It's not gonna be okay! I'm fucked! It's not okay, it's not okay, it's not okay, it's not okay!" Eddie started to hyperventilate, shaking violently, his eyes bulging out of his head.

Richie acted on impulse, removing the mug from Eddie's hands so he didn't burn himself, then grabbed Eddie's arms and pulled him into himself. He held Eddie tightly, chin resting on his shoulder. Eddie fought back, trying to shove Richie off of him, but soon grew too tired and melted into Richie. Richie held onto Eddie like his life depended on it. He hugged Eddie rough, making sure Eddie could feel his hands there, so he had something to focus on. He leaned his forehead against Eddie's, and the smaller boy's puppy dog eyes met Richie's.

"You're okay, I've got you." Richie whispered and Eddie's eyes watched his mouth as he spoke. Then, as quickly as it began, it ended. Eddie pulled away from Richie's grip, and wiped the tears and snot on his sleeve.

"I-I should get home. I shouldn't give Mom another reason to hate me." Eddie shrugged the blanket off his shoulders, and left Richie's house without saying another word.

"God damn it!" Richie yelled when he heard the door slam behind

Eddie. Richie turned to a wall and punched it as hard as he could. He tugged at his curly locks as he cried tears of frustration. He was doing so well. He was weak, Eddie made him weak. He cared too much for the boy, had too much of an effect on him. He had ignores the mantra that he had become so accustomed to, in hopes that he could help his friend, but instead scared him off. He had fucked up again, and it wasn't even worth it.

Richie stared at his hands in disgust, pushing the memory of cradling Eddie and how his hair felt between his fingers to the back of his brain. He balled up his fists and squeezed until his fingernails dug into his skin and blood oozed out. A physical reminder to not touch, and the pain of the consequences.

Four.

Richie was very good at pretending. He had always had an overreactive imagination and an endless amount of Voices. It was easier to pretend, with the Bowers gang disbanded. Victor and Butch lost their bullying confidence after Patrick went missing and Henry shipped off to the loony bin. The Losers were still losers, that hadn't changed, they just weren't targeted as much as they had been in middle school. High school was actually pretty boring in comparison to middle school. Richie had begun to believe he piqued at twelve. He could try, but he would never be cooler than the moment he snapped his best friend's arm back into place. He still tried to be that cool again by revamping his wardrobe from tacky printed shirts to grungy, desaturated flannels he had stolen from Bill, wearing jeans with holes in them, piercing his nose, and getting a shitty tattoo of a mouth spewing garbage on his forearm. Girls at school started to notice Richie, and Richie ,with his imagination, pretended to care.

Eventually he landed a girlfriend because no one could call you gay if you had a girlfriend. His girlfriend, Erin, was a nice, boring girl. She had big puppy dog eyes, freckles that sprinkled her cheeks, and pin straight reddish brown hair. She laughed at Richie's bad jokes, and blushed when he said something dirty. She was Christian and saving

herself for marriage which Richie thanked God, if he was real. She did love to kiss Richie, and Richie always imagined someone else in her place. He hated when she kissed him in front of people most of all. He'd let it happen a few times, more to prove himself than anything else, but most of the time he'd say flirtatiously, "Easy there tiger, not right here." She would blush and bury her face into his chest.

The best part about his pretend girlfriend, was that Beverly hated her. After he walked Erin home, Beverly would always complain about how annoying she was and how she didn't want her coming over. Richie would laugh and make it up to Bevvy by packing a bowl for them to share. She would begrudgingly smoke with him, still mumbling about how Erin always asks Bev for chapstick. Richie had accepted a long time ago that Beverly was the coolest girl in the world and no one could compare.

Richie knew that most of the Losers disliked Erin as well, except for Ben because he liked everyone. It was an unspoken rule that Erin was not allowed to Loser Events or the Clubhouse. Richie didn't care because he was only pretending to like Erin, but the Losers didn't know that. Eddie hated Erin almost as much as Beverly did. He would always get red and scrunch up his nose when Richie sat next to Erin instead of him. Erin and Eddie could be cousins they looked so similar, but they couldn't be more different. Eddie was spunky, argumentative, and over protective, Erin was sensitive, shy, and naive.

Richie was sure that when she was older she would have a nice husband, a Christian doctor or something of the sort, but it would never be him. Richie liked to imagine it though. The pair would have cute kids, two daughters with curly, auburn hair. He would come home from his boring desk job and they would attack him with hugs. Maybe they would have a dog. It would be nice, but Richie was dirty and could never have a clean life like that. Instead, Richie would probably end up an alcoholic like his dad. He'd probably die before he would allow himself to feel real love.

As Richie considered this, Erin was telling him about her day and all the drama involving Greta and Heather. She noticed he wasn't listening and pouted, lightly punching him in the arm.

"Sorry," he smiled sheepishly. "Tell me again, I promise I'm listening now."

"It's not that important, I just like talking to you, Chee." Richie hated the pet name, almost as much as Eddie hated Eds.

"You're too sweet, gonna give me a cavity, miss." Richie said smoothly with a smirk creeping up to his cheek. She giggled like she always did and he pecked her lips because she expected him to. She waved at him and she left to go to her next class while Richie unloaded his textbooks into his locker. He wiped Erin's gloss off his lips with the back of his hand. He hated that shit. When he looked up, he made eye contact with Connor Bowers as he often did because he had been so lucky to go to the same school with him. The boys hadn't talked about the day at the arcade, in fact, they didn't talk much at all. They would see each other, and their hearts would race, and escape each other as fast as possible.

Richie didn't remember much else of that school day. He'd gone to lunch at some point, sat through some classes, probably snuck off somewhere to smoke with Bev. He remembered leaving school, hugging Erin goodbye, and started to walk home as usual when he ran into Connor again. They interacted as usual, and Richie stepped aside to continue his route home when Connor grabbed the collar of his shirt.

"What the fuck-" Richie was interrupted with a fist making contact with his glasses.

"You think you can get a girlfriend and act like you're not a faggot?" Connor spat, hitting Richie harder. "I know your *dirty* little secret, Richie."

"You don't know shit," Richie growled as he regained composure. He tackled Connor to the ground, pinning his arms down with his knees, and wailed on Connor. Connor struggled free and rolled Richie on his back, bringing his closed fist down like a gavel on Richie's nose and mouth. Richie kneed Connor in the balls, kicked him in the stomach once he doubled over, and ran as fast as he could. He felt the blood rush down his face and his vision started to blur as he ran. Shit, he thought. His injuries might have been more serious than he thought.

A trip to Eddie's was cheaper than an ER visit, so he made his way over.

Richie used the last of his energy to climb up to Eddie's window and knocking the glass. Eddie thankfully opened his window quickly, fully prepared to yell in Richie's face when Richie fell through Eddie's window and into his room.

"Richie! What the fuck happened? Your whole face is covered in blood! Oh my god. Please don't die in my room my mom will kill me. Shit!" Eddie sputtered out, wheezing from the lack of air getting to his lungs. Richie fought hard but eventually his eyes grew too heavy and he slipped into unconsciousness.

When he woke up, his head was resting in Eddie's lap as Eddie petted his hair comfortingly. Eddie explained he didn't want to operate on Richie while he was out in case he hurt him. The pain greeted him soon enough. His eye, nose, and lips were throbbing intensely. It hurt to breathe through his nostrils so he had been forced to take slow, heavy breaths with his jaw slack.

"How do I look, Doc?" Richie asked hoarsely, forcing a smile.

"Fucking terrible, Rich. What happened?" Eddie demanded worriedly, attempting to prop Richie against his headboard. He dug under his bed until he found his first aid kit.

"Nothing, it was a stupid fight." Richie lied, playing with his fingers.

Eddie decided not to question him further, knowing it wouldn't go anywhere. Instead, he removed Richie's broken glasses and poured a generous amount of hydrogen peroxide on a rag and started to gingerly clean the dried blood off of Richie's face to better assess his wounds. Richie flinched a lot, punching himself in the leg when the pain got to be too much.

"I think your nose might be broken in, like, three different places." Eddie noted as he finished cleaning up Richie. "You're already bruising under your eyes. There's not much I can do for that. I can, however, get revenge for you snapping my arm back into place."

Eddie scoffed and carefully placed cotton balls up Richie's nose to stop the bleeding and keep the bones in place for now. Eddie made Richie promise that he wouldn't pass out if he left him, then ran downstairs to grab an ice pack and rushed back up in record time. He instructed Richie to hold the ice pack over his lips and nose because he had busted his lip as well.

"Richie, don't do this again please." Eddie pleaded, a serious glare washing over his face.

"I didn't exactly plan it," Richie argued. "But yeah, I'll be more careful. For your sake." Eddie smiled and chewed his lip, considering what to do next. He took a deep breath, leaned forward, and kissed Richie's forehead softly. Richie's heart skipped several beats and before he realized it, he was running away. *Dirty little secret, dirty little secret, dirty little secret*, his brain chanted at him. He started to feel dizzy again as he approached his house, stumbling through the front door.

"I need... to go... to the hospital!" Richie yelled in between hyperventilated breaths.

"Richie, what the fuck happened?!" Beverly screamed back, terror written across her face as she stared at Richie's.

"I broke my nose, let's go." Richie barked, still gripping the ice pack. Beverly nodded and quickly dialed Maggie's work number on the phone. She explained as quickly as she could, ending the conversation with "We'll meet you at the hospital."

Beverly loaded Richie into his dad's car and sped off. The cold compress contrasting with the hot beads of sweat nicely, and Richie found himself drifting off to sleep again, heart still pounding as Eddie's kiss lingered.

The doctor set his nose and taped his bones in place, gave him some pain meds, and sent him home. The drive home involved a lot of Maggie yelling at Richie, shedding a few tears of anger and worry. Eventually, he embraced the quiet of his room to think in peace. The memory of Eddie's lips pressed against his forehead played on repeat. That night, Richie walked to the Kissing Bridge with a broken nose,

hopped up on pain meds, and carved R + E in the shape of a heart. He pretended the E stood for Erin.

Five.

Senior year was over in the blink of an eye. Erin and Richie broke up the last day of school because Erin was still a junior and Richie would be moving to Los Angeles soon. She was understanding and kind, Richie hated it. The Losers helped each other with college applications and essays to schools all across the country. It seemed like none of them wanted to stay in Derry. At the time, it all seemed so exciting, finally escaping the town that made their lives so hellish, but as it approached, Richie felt afraid. Afraid he would never see his friends, his sister, again. It had all become too real. He suddenly didn't want to leave. He wanted to stay and help Mike on his farm. He didn't want to forget.

Stan was the first to leave. He had been offered a full ride to some place in Georgia, and he had family there that invited him to stay with them until his semester began, so he could get used to the layout. The goodbyes were emotional. They all cried in a huddle, suffocating Stanley as his parents packed his things into the family car.

"D-Don't f-f-forget us, o-or the p-p-promise." Bill sobbed as Stan waved goodbye, showing off the scar across his palm. They had hoped he wouldn't, but a part of them knew as soon as he left they wouldn't be hearing from him again.

Next was Ben. Ben had found a great architecture program in Texas. He talked the dean into letting him move in early to get a head start on his work. Richie had lovingly called him a suck up for it. It had been about a month since Stan had been shipped off and not one of the Losers received a call, a letter, or even a post card. This made Ben's goodbye that much more heart wrenching.

Bev struggled the most to let Ben go. They hugged and as if the world

melted around them and only the two of them existed time slowed down. Richie, Bill, Eddie, and Mike watched for what felt like forever until Ben finally pulled himself away, his chubby cheeks bright red and tear stained. His voice cracked as he wished them a final goodbye.

After that was Bill, who had also earned a generous scholarship in Rhode Island which was so close but felt so far away. The unofficial leader of the Losers Club was leaving, and Richie immediately felt lost without Bill's infinite wisdom and guidance. His childhood best friend was bound to soon forget him and pretty soon, Richie would forget him too. Bill had asked them not to cry when they said their goodbyes, and not to say goodbye because he would see them again. They obliged because they always followed Bill's orders. As soon as Bill's car disappeared in the distance, they all broke down crying.

Beverly left after Bill for the Big Apple. Richie was so proud of her but he was so scared to let her go. She would be living her fashion dreams in New York City and soon Richie would be studying to be an actor in L.A. He had grown to love his adopted sister more than he ever expected to, being he quite liked being an only child. Surely, she would visit Maggie for holidays and he would see her there. He really hoped she wouldn't forget Maggie, but the fear that she might built up in his chest. Richie had helped Beverly pack, called her a taxi, and sobbed like a baby as they waited on the porch. Bev, Eddie, and Mike comforted him as he wailed, but he saw Beverly fighting back a laugh. The taxi came and Richie felt like she was being torn from him. She blew a million kisses from the backseat of the cab and he smiled just a little.

Eddie and Richie just so happened to both be leaving the same week, Eddie on a Tuesday and Richie on Friday. They tried to make the most of the time they had left. They had a sleepover in Mike's barn and watched the stars from the roof. Eddie had been cold that night, so Richie draped his denim jacket over the smaller boy's shoulders. They had watched all their favorite movie's at Richie's up in the attic. Eddie threw a piece of popcorn in Richie's hair, which started a full on popcorn war. It took forever to clean up, but it was worth it. They looked through old yearbooks and scrapbooks and reminisced about their childhood friendship. One picture showed the two attached at

the head by a chewed up piece of bubblegum. Eddie's mom was so pissed that she had to ruin perfect little Eddie's haircut because of "that dumb Tozier boy."

The night before Eddie left, they laid in Richie's bed side by side staring up at the ceiling, talking softly.

"It won't happen to us, right? You and me... we're different. We can't forget each other." Eddie tried to convince himself what he had said was true.

"It would be nice," Richie replied, shifting his eyes.

"I want to remember you." Eddie's voice cracked. Somehow, I want to remember you hurt a lot more than I don't want to forget you.

"I want to remember you, too, Eddie Spaghetti." Richie sniffled as the tears that were building up threatened to make their escape.

"Don't call me Eddie Spaghetti," Eddie barked to lighten the tone. Richie laughed that contagious laugh that always made Eddie smile. "You know, I hope you learn to be funny in college. You'd be a great comedian if you could make me laugh."

Richie shoved Eddie, a little too forcefully, causing Eddie to fall off the bed and onto the hardwood floor. Eddie laughed, something rare and beautiful. He climbed back into bed and shoved Richie off as revenge, still giggling. The two laughed and laughed until it filled the room and then splintered off, still smiling at each other.

"Do you remember that day you broke your nose?" Eddie asked biting his lip like he always did when he was thinking about something.

"Of course I remember it, I broke my nose." Richie teased.

"Okay, well, do you remember when I kissed your forehead?" Eddie rephrased.

"Yes..." Richie answered sheepishly, scared of where this conversation was going.

"Why did you run? Did I scare you?" Eddie looked down, avoiding

eye contact. Richie considered how to answer for a long while, nervously fidgeting.

"You didn't scare me," Richie began eventually. "I ran because I was scared, but it had nothing to do with you. I just get scared of that kind of stuff, because I did something like that and I could have gotten killed. I just... ran because I didn't know what else to do. Running is just my go to."

"I-I think I want to kiss you again, Richie. For real." Eddie whispered something like a prayer and leaned in ever so slowly as to not scare Richie again. Richie was entranced by the glimmer in Eddie's eyes and his wet lips. His head felt empty as he stared at Eddie, heart racing. They stayed like that for a long while, just looking at each other in silence, only centimeters apart. Eddie's eyes eventually fluttered shut and closed the distance between them. Eddie's lips felt like soft served ice cream against Richie's, melting into Richie's mouth. Eddie's hands dusted up Richie's waist to his cheekbones where they rested gently. Richie wrapped his arms around Eddie's thin hips in response. They kissed sweet and slow until Eddie gently licked Richie's lips, coaxing them to separate. His tongue explored Richie's mouth, pressing his tongue against Richie's, tasting Richie finally. Eddie pulled away to catch his breath, sucking on Richie's lower lip slightly. His eyebrow furrowed and he stood from his position, backing away slowly.

"I'm sorry, I don't know why I did that. I have to go." Eddie spoke in a monotone voice, confused and scared. He left before Richie could protest.

Tears ran hot down his cheeks, curling into fetal position, and a familiar pain in his chest returned. He had felt it at the arcade, the movie theater, when he held Eddie through his panic attack, and when Eddie had kissed his forehead. It was a mixture of fear and self hatred. Why did he let Eddie do that? He needed to protect Eddie from the shame Richie felt, and he failed. He failed Eddie for the last time, he would never get the chance to make it up to him because he would leave the next day and forget all about him. Richie didn't leave his house the next day to tell Eddie goodbye, he stayed in his room feeling guilty and dirty and shameful. It would turn out to be the one thing he regretted most.

Richie left Friday morning for L.A. and he couldn't wait to forget, so he didn't have to feel that pain any more. Mike gave him a big hug and reminded Richie about the promise they had all made. Richie waved goodbye and escaped Derry as quickly as he could.

+ One

Richie was a coward. The phone call from Mike scared him so badly and he had no idea why. When he remembered why, he was even more scared. He saw Eddie's face for the first time in twenty-seven years, and the pain in his chest he hadn't felt since he was eighteen returned. Flashbacks of the kiss they had shared in Richie's attic made his blood run cold and his cheeks redden. He was now forty fucking years old and he was still afraid of the feelings he had for Eddie.

Seeing Eddie nearly die made him brave. Eddie had been brave for Richie, the least he could do in return was be brave for him. As Richie felt Eddie's blood splatter on him all he could think was I can't lose you again. Richie went on autopilot, remembering every medical tip Eddie had mentioned as a kid. He kept pressure on the wound while Ben, Beverly, Bill, Stan, and Mike fought off the clown. He counted Eddie's breaths and ordered him not to talk to save his energy. He felt It die as he held Eddie in his arms. He started commanding orders and moved as fast as he could to escape with Eddie. Ben helped Richie drag Eddie out of Neibolt without question. After that, Richie's memory blurred. Once they had arrived at the hospital they informed the Losers, covered in dirt and blood, that Eddie was in hemorrhagic shock and that the instrument used to impale Eddie had nearly missed vital organs. Richie had stopped the bleeding by pushing his jacket as hard as he could over Eddie's abdomen, saving Eddie from dying of blood loss. The doctors called it a miracle and maybe it was, or it was the magic of the turtle.

When visiting hours finally began, the group let Richie go first. Eddie had been thoroughly cleaned, free of blood and grime. His hair had been washed and it was still wet against his forehead. He was

connected to a heart monitor, an IV drip, and an oxygen tank and a breathing tube lodged into Eddie's throat. Eddie looked like he was finally resting, like he hadn't been in a while. Richie listed himself as Eddie's emergency contact number so he answered a lot of questions while he visited the sleeping man.

"How did this happen?"

"We were all camping and Eddie tumbled down the hiking trail, over some rocks, and landed on a fence post. We helped him up and came here as fast as we could."

"Who's his next of kin?"

"We are. We're his family. He's got nobody else." he lied.

"Is he on any medication?"

"How much time do you have?" Richie mocked, smirking.

"Thank you for your time, Mr. Tozier."

"Can I ask a question now?" Richie asked as the nurse turned to leave. "When's he going to wake up?"

"I couldn't tell you. He's in an induced coma, could be years before he wakes up. He's a fighter, though. I'm sure he'll pull through." The nurse said with a warm smile. It would have been comforting if she hadn't said he might be in a coma for years. Richie hadn't known how much he missed Eddie until he saw his glowing face in that Chinese restaurant. He needed him back, and soon.

Richie's turn came to an end and Stan was next in line. He had noticed white bandages wrapped around Stan's forearms, though he hadn't asked what they were for, or what he had done. He would ask later, when things weren't so crazy. He joined Bill, Ben, Mike and Bev in the lobby again. He sat next to his newly found sister and leaned his head on her shoulder.

"How did it go?" she asked as she placed a hand on his knee.

"He looks way better than he did back there," Richie sighed deeply. "I

miss him."

"I know," she said softly. Beverly always knew everything.

Weeks went by like that. The other Losers eventually went back home, telling Richie to keep them updated. Richie had to force himself to leave the hospital every once in a while to get a shower, just in case Eddie woke up and he stunk like shit. He would always return to the uncomfortable plastic chair next to Eddie's hospital bed. He watched Eddie's every movement carefully, not wanting to miss the moment he finally opened his eyes. He read Eddie boring medical magazines, told stories, and practiced his stand up routines during the smaller man's coma. Richie was stretched out across the chairs in Eddie's room, reading one of Bill's books aloud and was nearing the last pages. He looked up from the book and saw Eddie take a bigger breath than usual. He watched Eddie's eyelashes flutter and for the first time in almost two months he saw the puppy dog eyes he'd loved so much.

"Holy shit!" Richie laughed with glee. "Holy shit, don't move. I'll go get a nurse."

Richie danced in the hallway as he announced Eddie had finally woken up. The nurses who had gotten to know him cheered and one in particular followed him back to Eddie's room. The nurse checked Eddie's vitals and removed his breathing tube.

"Your throat is going to be a little sore, can I get you a glass of water?" the nurse asked with a small, tired smile. Eddie nodded in reply. The nurse left the two alone, Richie failing to hide his excitement.

"Richie," Eddie said hoarsely, smiling ear to ear despite the pain.

"Eddie!" Richie replied, almost giggling. "Oh, our cover story is you fell on a fence post when we were out camping."

Eddie forced out a strained laugh. It was something he would do. He was a considerable amount of pain, but if he was going to feel like this he was glad Richie was there instead of Myra. He didn't know what that meant yet, but he was too exhausted to worry about it.

"Eddie, I almost lost you," Richie's voice cracked as he fought back tears. "I was so scared. There's so much I wanted to tell you and I saw you bleeding out and I freaked the fuck out. I don't want to ever feel like that again."

"I'm sorry, Rich," Eddie said guiltily.

"No, don't be sorry. Seriously, you almost die and you apologize for it? I just, I care about you a lot. I needed you to know how much."

"I mean, I'm sorry that I kissed you and ran away all those years ago. I just scared myself. You remember that night I showed up at your house and I was panicking? My mom had found a men's underwear magazine under my bed. I already felt ashamed, but she made me feel like I was dirty and wrong. I kissed you, and remembered all the terrible things she called me, and I got scared. It was selfish, and I'm sorry." Eddie took breaks when his throat started to hurt, but he pushed through the pain because he knew it was important that he told Richie everything. He had been quiet about it for too long.

"I mean, we grew up in the worst place to even question your sexuality. I ran away a lot. I've felt so empty for so long, but I saw you and I felt just like I did back then. I really don't want to be scared any more, Eds. I-I'm gay, and I want that to be okay. And I love you, so fucking much. You don't have to say it back, I just need you to know. For my sake." Richie was crying, again. God, he was tired of crying.

"Of course I love you, Rich. I think you're probably the only person I've ever really loved." Eddie spoke truthfully, without considering the consequences. He didn't know what was going to happen next, but he was so excited.

The nurse returned with two bottles of water and Eddie drank them both without catching a breath in between. It soothed his throat, though it was still a bit scratchy. The nurse left again, and Richie smiled widely, still sniffing. His face was red and puffy, but Eddie still found him as handsome as when he met him.

"So... Myra?" Eddie asked, wincing at hearing her name aloud.

"I felt like you should be the one to tell her you're here," Richie started. "The doctor doesn't know she exists, sorry about that. Your phone has been blowing up for, like, two months though so I don't think she's happy."

Eddie couldn't help but laugh. Richie removed Eddie's phone from the charger and handed the device to him. Eddie scanned hundreds of text messages and voicemails, and felt anxiety bubbling up in his chest. As nice as it would be to leave this hospital, he dreaded going back home to her.

"She always makes me say 'I love you,' but I don't. I married her because I felt like I was supposed to. She scares me, Rich. She scares me like my mom did." Eddie admitted for the first time in the almost ten years he'd been married to her.

"Do you want a divorce?" Richie asked tentatively, his eyebrows furrowing. Eddie thought in a pregnant silence, then nodded wordlessly. "Okay, that's okay. You deserve to be happy. I can help if you want, I know a couple of great lawyers that helped me through some copyright stuff. I can also do nothing if you want that."

Eddie laughed again as his anxiety dissipated. He knew it was going to be a long and difficult journey, but Richie was the light at the end of the tunnel. He made note of the lawyers Richie had mentioned in his phone, and sent a quick text to Myra informing her he had a hiking accident and was in the hospital recovering. His phone immediately started to buzz the second he sent the message. He didn't bother to read the texts. He felt tired again despite being unconscious for the past couple of months. He invited Richie onto the bed with him, to which Richie made a self deprecating joke about his weight but eventually joined Eddie in the creaky bed. Eddie rested his head on Richie's chest as the two drifted off to sleep together.

Eddie's recovery after that was simple in comparison. The wound was almost healed close when he had woken up. The skin was a saturated pink and sensitive, but it was better than a gaping hole. The bandages compressed his ribs which made it a little harder to breathe. He had to do a bit of physical therapy but before he knew it, he was ready to be discharged. Richie and Eddie exchanged a very long goodbye hug that grew tighter and tighter as they realized at

some point they would have to let go. Richie went back to his lonely, too-big home in California and Eddie to his cramped shared apartment with Myra.

"Thank god you're home! You are so lucky you were in a coma and couldn't call me, I was so worried!" Myra greeted him in a weird combination of anger and relief.

"Myra, we need to talk," Eddie said as he unpacked his things. "I have been dealing with a lot of new trauma recently and I need time to process that. I can't see myself really healing if I'm still married to you. Our relationship is too unhealthy. You can't control every aspect of my life, and I shouldn't be afraid of you. I want a divorce."

"Where is this coming from? You're gone for months and come home and demand a divorce? How dare you, Edward Kaspbrak?! All I do is love and care for you and this is the thanks I get?" Myra exploded as she often did. Eddie flinched at the volume of her voice. He felt like he was twelve again and his mother was screaming at him. He felt the urge to hide in his childhood bedroom and cry silently but he was an adult and he needed to finally stand up for himself.

"Myra, you do not love me and I do not love you! If you loved me, you would know this is the best thing for me right now," Eddie fought back sternly, lifting up his shirt and revealing his scar. "I almost died, Myra! I hate looking at this fucking thing! How do you expect me to heal from this when you're manipulating me?!"

Myra's face twisted in horror in the face of Eddie's injury. She didn't argue back. She had finally realized the damage she had done. They printed divorce papers together that night in silence. He signed his half and she signed hers, in her maiden name and not Kaspbrak. Eddie thanked her and started to put his things in boxes. He didn't know where to go next, he just knew it had to be away from her.

Late that night, he got a call from Richie. He dropped the packing tape and answered the call as fast as he could.

"Just checking you haven't forgot me yet." Richie greeted him and Eddie could practically hear him smiling.

"I wish I could, Trashmouth." Eddie replied lovingly as he stepped out onto his balcony. He looked up at the faint stars through the clouds of pollution and wondered if Richie was looking at the same sky.

"How's home life?" Richie asked.

"There wasn't as much screaming as I expected," Eddie laughed awkwardly. "Actually, I told her I wanted a divorce. It took a little persuasion but she signed the papers. I'm in the middle of packing up my things now."

"Wow, you're quite the speed runner, Eduardo." Richie chuckled. "Where are you going?"

"I have no clue, Tozier." Eddie answered honestly.

"I know forty years of knowing each other is moving pretty fast, but my house could use some company." Richie chuckled and Eddie pictured him scratching the back of his neck like he always did when he was nervous.

"Are you sure you want that? Having me around full time is kind of annoying." Eddie joked because it's what they had always done, but he was really asking if Richie was serious about him moving in.

"At least you know it," Richie kidded back with a flirtatious tone. "For real, though. I almost adopted a dog I'm so lonely here. I don't know, I feel like I've already lost so much time of being with you. Maybe you don't have to live with me, but I'd like you to be near me."

"I want to be with you, too, Richie. Of course I want to move in with you." Eddie giggled like a school girl.

Eddie wrapped up his divorce with Myra, which was fairly easy after their talk. They weren't having sex, kissing, or even sleeping in the same bed long before Eddie left for Derry. She understood their marriage was no longer a marriage and their lawyers agreed to a no-fault divorce. Eddie would pay alimony because Myra was unemployed and needed support during the life change. It was civil and kind, and the nicest thing Myra had ever done for him.

After that, he finally moved in with Richie. Richie's house, despite

being messy which Eddie would soon fix, was beautiful. It had three bedrooms, two baths, a chef's kitchen, a pool, and a hot tub. Modest for a celebrity, but it suited Richie well. Richie's pride and joy was the living room. It was more of a home theatre, complete with a screen and a projector. Brown leather loveseats decorated with comfy throw pillows and blankets faced the screen with a beautiful red rug underneath them. A lovely mahogany coffee table tied it all together nicely. Richie's bedroom was decorated similarly, red, brown, and black themed. He had a giant king sized bed with red sheets and a matching comforter, which was also pillowed to the max. He had no dresser, but a walk in closet full of Richie's terrible fashion taste. Two mahogany bedside tables and matching lamps filled the empty space. A mirror with a black frame stretched across one wall and the opposite was decorated with framed pictures of random things. The room definitely had Richie written all over it, but in a sophisticated manner.

Eddie made himself at home the best he could. He had set up one of the spare bedrooms, the one closest to Richie's, to stay in while Richie and him sorted out their boundaries. Eddie imagined once he moved in with Richie, the two would just jump feet first into a relationship with cuddling, kissing, and fucking. That had not happened, as the two were still coping with a lot of trauma on top of coming to terms with being gay. Richie was still very much afraid of touching, after all those years telling himself it was wrong to. Sometimes Eddie would place a hand in the small of his back and he would flinch, leaving both of them feeling awkward and apologetic. Eddie would sometimes fall into episodes of manic cleaning, showering excessively, and convincing himself he was sick. He'd recover by himself because he insisted it, and the pair would go back to what normalcy they had.

The nightmares helped bring the two closer together. Eddie first noticed it one night as he laid restlessly on his bed when he heard Richie groaning like he was in pain. He rose from the mattress cautiously, tiptoeing to Richie's room. He placed an ear against the door and heard Richie pleading "no" repeatedly, followed by more groaning and what sounded like crying. He pushed the door open, expecting to see Richie sitting up in bed but he was sleeping instead. Eddie could see the tears glistening on his cheeks. Just then, Richie

shrieked out a gut wrenching scream. Eddie ran to his side and shook him awake.

"You're okay?" Richie asked softly as he looked up to Eddie.

"I'm okay, and you're okay," Eddie confirmed. "Can I touch you?"

Richie nodded and Eddie cradled the bigger man in his arms. Richie held onto him tightly, paying attention to how his skin felt against Eddie's to verify Eddie was really there with him. The sensation felt so good. He hadn't been touched like this in so long, the contact almost overwhelmed him. Goosebumps prickled everywhere and Richie loved it. He heard a voice telling him "don't touch" but he ignored it.

"I saw you dying again. It felt so real." Richie broke the silence as Eddie held him like a hurt puppy.

"I'm okay, Rich. You saved me." Eddie assured, sounding proud of Richie.

"I've been scared of so much for so long, Eddie. I'm done being scared. I won't ever lose you again." Richie said seriously as he sat up to face Eddie in the dark room. He leaned forward with a burst of confidence and connected his lips with Eddie's. It was just as magical as the first time they had kissed. Eddie smiled into it, wrapping his arms around Richie's neck to pull him closer. Richie heard the voice repeating itself but the sound of Richie's heartbeat drowned it out.

"I love you so much it hurts," Richie said as he pulled away.

"I love you so much it heals." Eddie responded cheesily, unable to stop smiling.

As dorky as it sounds, Eddie's love did heal Richie. After the kiss, the voice in Richie's head telling him being gay was wrong got weaker and weaker. He would still flinch when Eddie held his hand while they ate breakfast and read the news together, but his skin would tingle and he relaxed into the affection, rubbing his thumb over Eddie's knuckles. The feeling of his skin against Eddie's never got old and he never had to ask for it, Eddie just had a sixth sense that told

him when he needed to touch Richie.

He observed Richie carefully and memorized the touches that helped Richie function. When Richie was angry, Eddie would squeeze his shoulders and he'd deflate like a balloon. When Richie was sad, he kissed his forehead sweetly and Richie would smile a little more. When Richie was anxious and scratching himself, Eddie would slip his hand into Richie's and his anxiety would wash away. He held Richie's hand when he came out to his fans in a livestream and encouraged him off screen. He wrapped himself in Richie's arms to hide his face from paparazzi until they were ready to come out as a couple. When they finally did, Richie was terrified of PDA because of what happened when he was thirteen. Eddie grabbed his hand and kissed the back of it, as if to say "you're safe, no one's going to hurt you." Richie liked PDA a lot more after that. Sometimes people would say homophobic things, but Richie was a celebrity and paid body guards to protect him from any real danger.

"I never thought I could be loved like this," Richie said one night as they ate their dinner in a beautiful restaurant Richie had reserved a table at, just because. "My parents never needed human contact like I did. I made myself think it was wrong of me to want it for a long time. It got even scarier because I liked boys. I had seen bad things happen to boys who liked other boys, I was terrified of what would happen if I kissed another boy's cheek. Times have changed a lot. I feel like I can finally be me and not have to be ashamed of any part of me, because I know you love all of me. I love you so much it hurts, Eds..."

"I love you so much it heals, Rich." Eddie finished for him, smiling wide with hearts in his eyes. Richie got down on one knee with teary eyes and Eddie gasped loudly and covered his face with his hands.

"Eddie Kaspbrak, I have loved you for almost three decades. I will love you for decades more. You saved me, not the other way around. Will you please marry me?" Richie asked and revealed the ring inside the black box. It was a beautiful silver band with small diamonds wrapped around it. Engraved on the inside was "Love that heals."

"Yes, yes, yes." Eddie cried as Richie slipped the ring onto his finger, then wrapping his hands around Eddie's waist and lifted him up in

the air easily. Eddie giggled as he admired his beautiful fiancé and kissed him sweetly. Richie couldn't have been happier as he kissed his only love, with no voice to ruin it.

THE END.